

The Exploding Father

The exploding father
silently smolders with
slow wicks buried
beneath light camouflage

hot flares etch eyeballs permanently.

Once a simmering youth
now he explodes with impunity.

Hot spots in his psyche
percolate with vitriol,
pockets full of short fuses,
arteries stashed with nitro.

Why does he flame
in a furious hale of sparks
flashing blue, yellow and white?

Don't ask. It only sets him off.

What My Mother Saw

What she saw:
a front room that needed dusting,
the kitchen a good scrubbing;
dishes sticky from
breakfast, lunch and dinner.
Toss in a few brats,
and a shadow that pauses and waits,
making the floorboards creak.
She'd stop,
wait.

Thirteen and she'd
begged her mother, please, no no,
please no, but in Polish, with all
the soft sounds coming out hard.

The other girls,
her friends,
faces streaked with tears,
all begging and pleading no,
no no no, the Great Depression's chorus,
its dirge of fear.
This was their youth.

Don't leave me here to sleep
so close to their bedroom
to him
the shadows, and the tiptoeing—
No, scratch that.

No tiptoeing, he just took her
just like that:
just another utensil,
like the broom or mop.

Her mother works the braid of betrayal
into her hair. Hands button her into a dress.

He clears his throat and waits.

Turn the page: this is another story of
immigrant success.

The Imploding Mother

She was taught that it didn't happen.
That the money was needed
That whatever happened was for the best
That everything was meant for a reason.
That he didn't really mean it.
That it's to be expected a fine looking girl like you
That you probably led him on.
That's what men do.
That you should have known.
That you're too attractive, take that bow out of your hair.
That you're lucky he paid attention to you
That you had it coming dressed like that cover yourself
That there's no use screaming over spilled milk
That it was meant to happen one day
That if you had nicer clothes it wouldn't have happened
That when you're older you'll understand
That it's time to get over it
That it's not like you're bleeding
That you can't prove it anyway
That life doesn't hand you anything you have to take what it gives
 so hand over that money your sister is hungry
That you'll be back on the job tomorrow bright and early.

We Rise

Like a moth I rise from bed,
join the others, bump heads the ceiling.

shh

quiet

wait,

safety's above.

Our bodies below
lie curled, cruelty tossed larvae,
fear our only blanket.

See how we rise: let's fly,
spread arms wide and white.

Return to those poor bodies?
escape is through the window.

Mother stands waiting.
Father bends over our husks.
They don't know we're gone.
We'll return tomorrow, when it's safe.

Her Face

Now that she's dead,
we began a slow dig.

We examined, sifted, combed through,
held up to the light, raked, rummaged, ransacked
ravaged every corner of every room,
every closet and its shelves
for traces of the girl who had been our mother.

It was our private hunt,
a furtive probe for clues,
our backs to each other
working in tandem as we
brushed away dust hoping to
find artifacts she might have left behind.

And uncovered this single photo,
an entire album – loot.
A photo that showed a 12 year old
with features too big for her face.
It was – how to put this kindly –
a man's face – on a slender girl's neck
with the kind of purity
you see on people growing up
on an atoll in the Pacific,
smiling wildly at their first camera.

I peered over her shoulder
at the Detroit neighborhood,
of broad shouldered houses
and bashful front yards.
A street that claimed the sidewalks
would never trip its young.

On her face – nothing was measured;
nothing divided. Nothing held back.
There was nothing coy,
nothing posed, nothing tempered
by the outside world's censure.
Clearly, she had never glanced at a fashion magazine
with its lessons on how to be a female adolescent.
Nothing had tampered with this man-face.
No apologies for the big nose, big smile, big expression.

I peered closer,
trying to guess how close she was to the abyss.
No scars apparent in her wholeheartedness.

Had it happened?
The man the whispers the secrets the pay-off.
It was – what – a month – two weeks – maybe just a day or two away?
Was it tomorrow when she'd be dragged in so far and deep she'd forget she'd been broken?
Was it that very day of the picture, when the architecture of loss would take over,
and its columns and arches, atriums, buttresses, vaults and spans would cave in,
lying shattered beneath the face of her youth?

Her mother would teach her to smooth and rearrange her expressions.
She would learn to cover over a sinkhole of eruptions,
letting the secret niches and dark corners take over.
Age would tame her features into attractiveness.

Close the album –
still the Medusa: one look was enough.
This face was the before we never knew she had.
Her life with us – all pure after.